

Museum News

THE TOLEDO
MUSEUM OF ART
WINTER 1968



THE MUSEUM'S COLLECTION OF LA FARGE

Several artists are represented in depth at this Museum by comprehensive groups of drawings, watercolors and prints. These include Charles Meryon and Anton Mauve whose works were the subject of previous issues of *Museum News*. This issue is devoted to John La Farge, an American artist represented in the Museum by a collection comprising forty drawings, ten watercolors, and one painting. They cover the full range of La Farge's artistic personality.

The drawings and watercolors by La Farge were acquired in 1911 from the artist's estate by Edward Drummond Libbey, the Museum's founder and first president, and were given by him to the Museum in the following year. The collection will be exhibited here as a group for the first time in many years in conjunction with the appearance of this publication.

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Otto Wittmann, Director

Museum News
THE TOLEDO MUSEUM OF ART
TOLEDO, OHIO

WINTER 1968

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COVER: JOHN LA FARGE. *A Woman Reading* (probably Mrs. John La Farge) charcoal. About 1860-65. 6¼ x 3¾ inches. 12.540.

JOHN LA FARGE

DRAWINGS AND WATERCOLORS

John La Farge (1835-1910) was considered by people living in the late 19th century to be America's most important mural painter and the creator of fine stained glass windows. His name has all but dropped from common knowledge today. A recent revival of interest in his art has revealed La Farge's importance in introducing certain traditions of European art to America, most important of which was monumental wall decoration. The current re-evaluation has also shown that La Farge, in his easel paintings of landscape and still life subjects, was studying the optical effects of light and atmosphere a few years before the Impressionists.

The drawings and watercolors by La Farge in the Museum's collection give an especially good idea of this artist's personality because they cover the full range of his career from his earliest to his latest years. Some are for mural decorations, stained glass windows, and book and magazine illustrations. Other drawings and watercolors are intimate personal records of family, friends and travel. A few of the drawings were executed by La Farge's assistants and offer a revealing opportunity for comparison with those executed by the master himself.

La Farge was born in New York City of French parents who had emigrated from France in the early 19th century. The La Farge family had been financially successful in America and lived in the European atmosphere of the small French colony near Washington Square in New York. Growing up reading French literature and living amidst French Empire furniture and paintings by old European masters like Salomon van Ruysdael and Salvator Rosa, young John's outlook was more cosmopolitan than the average New Yorker. American taste catered to the grandiose paintings of the Hudson River School and elaborate Victorian architecture and interior decoration. La Farge showed an early interest in drawing and painting. At six he was taking lessons in painting from a relative who painted watercolor miniatures in the 18th century French manner. In 1853 he graduated from Mount Saint Mary's College in Maryland and went on to study law. In 1856-57 he made a two year trip to Europe during which he met many Parisian literary and artistic figures (Theophile Gautier, Gavarni, the Goncourts, and Flaubert, for example) and studied for a short time in the studio of the Academician, Thomas Couture. During this trip he made copies

of old master drawings and became acquainted with the works of Delacroix and the Pre-Raphaelites. Shortly after this important voyage, La Farge took up painting as his profession.

In the spring of 1859, La Farge moved from New York to Newport, Rhode Island, to study under William Morris Hunt. Hunt, like La Farge, had studied in Europe, becoming aware of European artistic traditions as well as the then new school of Barbizon painting. La Farge spent the following ten years in Newport painting relatively small easel paintings of landscapes, still lifes (a favorite subject was waterlilies), portraits of family and friends, and a few religious or mythological subjects (Figures 1-4). During this time La Farge seriously studied new discoveries in the field of optics. His landscapes and still lifes are investigations of the effects of light and atmosphere on various colors and textures at different times of day. In the Museum's collection there is a charcoal drawing of a woman standing in a landscape (Figure 1). The sitter is probably the artist's wife whom he married in 1860. Careful notations on the black and white drawing clearly record the hazy pink-lilac tones of evening atmospheric effects. A drawing of a coastal landscape (Figure 3) is inscribed "lighter reddish at horizon and radiating, as it were, from sea/clouds like silver on darker olive—earth *very dark*/ no distinct form distinguishable." Although executed in charcoal, this drawing conveys the optical impression of shimmering evening light as it hits the slick surface of the calm sea and the looming masses of the coastal hills.

During the last years spent at Newport, La Farge designed several series of book and magazine illustrations including Alfred Lord Tennyson's *Enoch Arden* and Robert Browning's *Dramatis Personae* (Figures 5-7). These illustrations show widely different sources of inspiration. Some were influenced by the Pre-Raphaelite style and others by Japanese prints (Hokusai in particular) which La Farge was one of the first Westerners, let alone Americans, to appreciate. These illustrations display a tendency to eclectic borrowing from many different periods, regions, and styles which was to become one of the hallmarks of La Farge's later art.

La Farge's Newport paintings of the 1860's, while they achieved some success with the critics, did not sell well because their bright colors and sketchy treatment were not understood by many critics and a public used to the precise, descriptive romanticism of the Hudson River School. This might have been a partial cause for La Farge's almost completely giving up easel painting during the course of the 1870's.

In 1876 La Farge received his first commission for mural painting from the architect H. H. Richardson to design the decorations for Trinity Church in Boston (Figure 8). Richardson's church reflects southern French and Spanish Romanesque churches although the final conception is an entirely personal

creation and interpretation. La Farge's murals are inspired by Byzantine mosaic wall decorations with monumental figures over fifteen feet high on a flat, terra-cotta colored background; other parts of the ornamentation are gold. The painting technique is broad, inspired by the painterly style of the 16th century Venetians and by Delacroix in the 19th century. This was among the first large scale mural decorations executed in America and its success led to many additional commissions for La Farge in the Boston area and New York. It also led to a flowering of mural decoration by other artists all over the country.

Among La Farge's subsequent decorations is the great mural for the Church of the Ascension in New York in 1886 (Figures 9-10). Here La Farge reached a high point of eclectic borrowing from many sources. The grouping of the apostles is based on a fresco by the great 15th century Italian master, Masaccio, and the ascending Christ is from a painting by Raphael. The landscape behind was inspired by that around Mt. Fuji which La Farge had seen during a trip to Japan made that same year with his friend, the historian Henry Adams. The broad handling of the paint and the colors were again inspired by the 16th century Venetians and Delacroix. Although La Farge's borrowings were both specific and diverse, the end result was, like Richardson's Trinity Church, personal and original.

La Farge was equally famous for his stained glass windows (Figure 17). In the 1870's and 80's he discovered a way of making opalescent glass. He perfected a technique of using the new opalescent glass with other colored glass and produced dazzlingly colored windows in churches as well as private homes. The luminous colors obtained through experimentation and the effects which he achieved by fusing pieces of glass or by varying the sizes and mosaic-like patterns of the glass fragments brought effects never achieved in that art.

Because of the demand for his murals and windows and because of the scale of his enterprises, La Farge had a shop of assistants from 1876 until his death. After the 1880's La Farge rarely, if ever, executed the final mural or window, working only on the preliminary drawings. These drawings (Figure 18) reveal a sensitivity and monumentality often lost in the colder execution by his assistants in the final work. La Farge continued to design windows and murals until his death in 1910. The locations of these large works ranging from New York and Boston to Portland, Maine, Baltimore, St. Paul, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh to name only a few, indicate the popularity and wide influence of La Farge.

In 1890 and 1891 La Farge went, again as the guest of his friend, Henry Adams, on a long voyage to the South Seas, visiting Hawaii, Samoa, Tahiti (shortly before Gauguin arrived there), Fiji and others. During this trip he painted fresh and simply direct watercolors of the exotic landscapes and of the natives and their activities (Figures 12-16). These works reveal his nostalgia for past times when civilization had not inhibited man's natural beauty and instincts;

La Farge describes the way of life and appearance of the natives as "a rustic Greece still alive somewhere." The brilliant watercolors produced during this interlude did not, upon his return to New York, cause a change in La Farge's monumental-eclectic style of mural and window decoration.

La Farge's creativity did not, by any means, end with his artistic production. He was also the author of several books ranging from works which popularized the paintings and sculpture of European old masters such as *One Hundred Masterpieces of Painting* and *Gospel Story in Art* to fascinating accounts of his travels in Japan and the South Seas. He also wrote books intended for the specialist in art history such as his *Considerations on Paintings*.

In the late 19th century La Farge's eclecticism and scholarly frame of mind were seen as positive traits in an artist and even led one critic to compare him to a Renaissance man. Today these traits are often thought to inhibit the creativity of a great artist. Nevertheless a re-evaluation of La Farge's work reveals an artist who worked with sincerity and intelligence producing works of lasting quality.

Katharine C. Lee

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| | <i>John La Farge</i> , May 4 - June 10, 1966, Graham Gallery, New York. |



1. Woman (probably Mrs. John La Farge) in a Landscape with Color Notations. Charcoal. About 1860. 5 1/16 x 3 inches. 12.560.



2. *Study of the Bayou Teche, Louisiana.* Pencil and charcoal. 1860. $2\frac{7}{8} \times 5\frac{1}{8}$ inches. 12.562.



3. Coastal Landscape in Newport, Rhode Island with Color Notations. Charcoal. About 1865-69.
4 15/16 x 7 3/8 inches. 12.543.



4. *Bishop John Hughes*. Charcoal. About 1864.
5 3/4 x 4 1/2 inches. 12.559.



5. Study for Frontispiece of Robert Browning's
"Dramatis Personae". Charcoal. 1864.
 5 x 8 1/16 inches. 12.546.



6. J. H. WHITNEY after design by JOHN LA
 FARGE. Frontispiece of Robert Browning's
"Dramatis Personae". Wood engraving.



7. *Study for Two Figures for Robert Browning's "Men and Women"*. Pencil. 9 x 5 1/2 inches. 12.561.



8. *Studies of Heads of Two Angels for Mural Decorations, Trinity Church, Boston.*
Charcoal and brown ink. 1876. 5 1/2 x 7 1/8 inches. 12.573.



9. *Study of Two Angels for Ascension Mural, Church of the Ascension, New York.* Pencil. Dated: "1886". 5 3/4 x 5 inches. 12.539.



10. *The Ascension.* Mural. 1887. Church of the Ascension, New York.

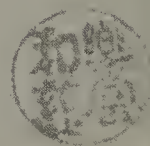


11. *Japanese Woman in traditional dress, with color notes.* Charcoal and red chalk. 1886. 8 5/8 x 5 3/4 inches. This was used as an illustration in La Farge's *An Artist's Letters from Japan* published in New York in 1897.



4 X 4 1/2 —

Mending Lantorn
in crates of Kilanusa, Selah? 1890
at night
light is reflected in the water



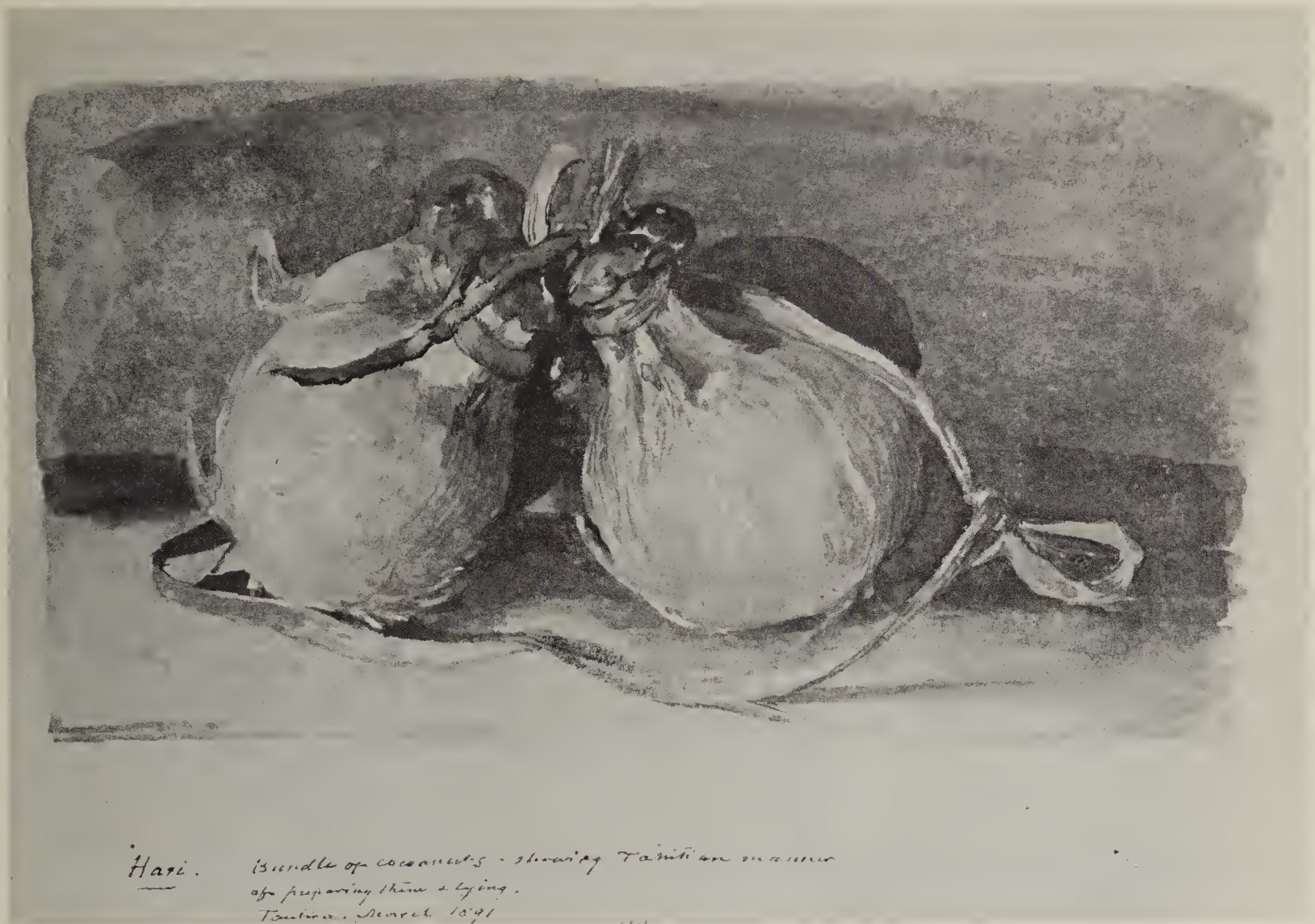
12. *Mending Lantern in Crater of Kilauea.* Charcoal.
1890. 7 9/16 x 5 inches. 12,554.



13. *Mother and Child, Samoa.* Charcoal. 1890.
5 1/2 x 4 15/16 inches. 12.545.
Used as an illustration in La Farge's
Reminiscences of the South Seas, New York, 1890.



14. *Study of Arm and Hand of Fish Queen, Samoa(?)*.
Charcoal. 1890. 7 5/8 x 5 1/8 inches. 12.553.



15. *Hari*. Watercolor. Inscribed: "Tahiti, 1891".
6 3/4 x 9 7/8 inches. 12.532.



16. *Looking East in Tautira Village, Tahiti.*
 Watercolor. Dated: "1891". 17 1/2 x 12 inches.
 12.525.



17. *Study for Wisdom for the Ames Window, Unity Church, North Easton, Massachusetts.* Charcoal.
Dated: "1900". 11 x 7 11/16 inches. 12.567.



18. *Madonna and Child* (preliminary study for mural on canvas, Emmanuel Chapel, St. Luke's Cathedral, Portland, Maine. Pencil. About 1904. 11 x 8 inches. 12.556.



19. RAPHAEL. *Sistine Madonna*. Dresden, Gallery. (Photo Alinari) This painting served as the source for the above drawing.

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